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ABSTRACT

The methods used in the Teacher Corps Program Evaluation are based principally on the importance of securing the cooperation of local participants during data collection. Several principles concerning local cooperation were established and explained. These included encouraging active participation, encouraging local review of instruments, maintaining communication, establishing clear lines of communication and responding to concerns, providing and receiving feedback, and providing lead time before a data collection activity. Standards for maintaining rapport with various projects were established. Communication lines, properly established, facilitate continued cooperation. These techniques seem to have been successful because all projects have remained in the evaluation samples. Response rates for self-report questionnaires are high, indicating that participants value the evaluation as a means of expressing their views of the project and the program as a whole. The response rates to the questionnaires by teachers and administrators has been very high. (DWH)

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SECURING LOCAL COOPERATION IN A NATIONAL EVALUATION: THE TEACHER CORPS EVALUATION MODEL

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SECURING LOCAL COOPERATION IN A NATIONAL EVALUATION: THE TEACHER CORPS EVALUATION MODEL

"Information on ... the conduct of program evaluations is often available only in the form of oral history, more characteristic of primitive tribes than of literate scholars or managers."[1]

Introduction

As researchers, we are willing and indeed anxious to report the results of evaluations. However, we have done a poor job of sharing information about the conduct and management of evaluations. This oversight is most likely due to time constraints or a lack of money budgeted for such a task, rather than to a felt need to guard evaluation management secrets. Regardless, many of the techniques essential to successful evaluation management must be learned anew by others. Too often, this relearning occurs at the expense of the participants in the field, who probably begin to hope they never see another researcher or evaluator.

This paper discusses the methods used in the Teacher Corps Program Evaluation that could apply to other evaluations and studies. These methods, derived from SRI's long experience in conducting major evaluations, are based principally on the importance of securing the cooperation of local participants during data collection. Preliminary results of the data collection are discussed to support the view that these methods have been successful.

Background of the Evaluation

The Teacher Corps Program is authorized under Title V of the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended in 1976 (PL 94-482). In that authorization, the specific purpose of the Teacher Corps Program is stated thus:

> ...to strengthen the educational opportunities available to children in schools having concentrations of low-income families and to encourage colleges and universities to broaden their programs of teacher preparation and to encourage institutions of higher education and local educational agencies to improve programs of training and retraining for educational personnel....

Thus, Teacher Corps grants are awarded to projects comprising university, school district, and community representatives. Role groups involved in each project include the project director, the dean and faculty members in the college of education, members of the community, the superintendent of schools, principals and teachers, and Teacher Corps interns. A total of 132 5-year projects have been funded. Seventy-nine of these were funded in July 1978, the remaining 53 were funded in July 1979.

In the Teacher Corps evaluation longitudinal data are being gathered in all 132 Teacher Corps projects. A 5-year study, the evaluation is now in its third year; data collection started in the second year and is planned as a 3-year activity. Data are being collected via quarterly essays prepared by local project personnel on topics assigned by SRI, self-report questionnaires administered to a number of different role groups, and other instruments administered at school districts and universities. Instruments used at a selected subset of 30 projects have included interviews with up to 20 persons, observations of inservice training events, an additional self-report questionnaire (repeated measures), student questionnaires, logs

for recording training events, rosters of teachers in the schools and faculty members in the colleges of education, and forms for gathering attendance data.

Also included in the evaluation are special studies on multicultural education, program implementation, dissemination, and Youth Advocacy and Native American projects. These special studies involve case study visits.

The Problems in Securing Local Cooperation

The Education Division General Administrative Regulations (EDGAR) state that "A grantee shall cooperate in any evaluation of the program by the Secretary or the appropriate official of the Education Division" and that, "If a grantee cooperates in a Federal evaluation of a program, the appropriate official of the Education Division may determine that the grantee meets the evaluation requirements of the program..."[2] Despite these regulations, we anticipated that in view of the complexity of the evaluation design and the amount of data needed, some projects would avoid cooperating in the evaluation. Reasons for avoidance would likely include:

(1) A perceived loss of project staff time, which would result in a reduced ability to implement the project.

(2) A fear that the outside evaluator, not fully understanding the climate of the project and the constraints within which it works, would misinterpret information and make incorrect assessments.

(3) A fear of the effects of the evaluation; a negative report might result in a cut in funds or in cancellation of the program. (In reality, projects are seldom cancelled once funded.)

(4) A fear that questions asked might be offensive to participants in the local project.

(5) A concern that site visitors would intrude and/or disrupt project activities.

(6) As in any data collection activity, a concern about the amount of additional work involved and the invasion of privacy.

Problems Resulting from Lack of Cooperation

The subset of 30 projects was carefully selected to represent the universe of Teacher Corps projects. A stratified design was used, incorporating three criteria: prior Teacher Corps experience of the project, the degree of urbanization of the community in which the project is located, and whether the project was initiated by the institution of higher education (IHE) or the school district. In addition, the ethnicity of the student population and geographical location were considered. The refusal of a project to participate could seriously have affected the evaluation. For example, as Table 1 shows, a single project sometimes represents a cell in the design. In such cases, the loss of a project would present a major problem because our ability to generalize findings across projects and make statements about the program as a whole would be restricted.

Attrition within projects was also a potential problem. If the people to be interviewed and surveyed were not convinced of the merits of the evaluation, poor individual response and inadequate documentation would result in poor data quality.

Finally, the problems of obtaining project cooperation were exacerbated because in this as in many other major evaluations, no provision was made in the contract for formal feedback to projects. Since one of the first ground rules in gaining local cooperation is to "never take without giving something in return," the data collection task was made particularly difficult by this constraint.

Table 1

CLASSIFICATION OF PROGRAM 78 AND PROGRAM 79 TEACHER CORPS PROJECTS WITH REGARD TO PROJECT EXPERIENCE AND URBANIZATION

		Beginning		Continuing		Totals*	
Program	Urbanization	Population Size	Sample Size	Population Size	Sample Size	Population Size	Sample Size
Program 78	Urban	5	3	24	7	29	10
	Semi-Urban	7	3	8	3	15	6
	Rural	5	2	7	2	12	4
	Totals	17	8	39	12	56	20
Program 79	Urban	5	1	17	3	22	4
	Semi-Urban	6	1	10	1	16	2
	Rural	4	2	6	2	10	4
	Totals	13	4	32	6	48	10
Grand totals		30	12	71	18	104	30

*Excluding the Native American and Youth Advocacy projects with incomplete feeder systems and projects located outside the Continental United States.

Gaining Local Cooperation

Using lessons learned during other evaluations and during the initial planning year in this study, we established the following principles concerning local cooperation:

- Encourage local subjects to participate actively in the evaluation; encourage them to comment on the design and act on good suggestions.
- Encourage local subjects to review instruments.
- Inform people and keep them informed. This evaluation will be 5 years long, and communication must be maintained throughout.
- Establish clear lines of communication; respond to concerns.
- Provide and receive feedback.
- Never surprise anyone.

These principles are discussed in detail below.

Encourage Active Participation

Confidence in the evaluation and participation in the design process encourage a sense of ownership among local participants. In the Teacher Corps evaluation, senior project staff members were chosen as the site visitors to increase local confidence and participation in the evaluation. This was distinct from the typical evaluation, described by Boruch and Cordray[3], where "graduate students, baccalaureates with some quantitative background, or individuals [such as] former teachers with experience in local ... education agencies" collect data. During the planning year, senior staff members visited 24 Teacher Corps projects, seeking opinions about the design from local project staff and acquiring knowledge about Teacher Corps. A natural, and important, by-product of these visits was the visibility the site visitors gained at the local sites.

The use of senior staff members has been successful because they have given an accurate view of the evaluation to local projects , and Teacher Corps project staff view them as colleagues who are honest in their appraisal of the project.

Encourage Local Review of Instruments

All pilot-testing of instruments and methods was conducted in Teacher Corps projects and involved Teacher Corps participants. This ensured that the questions we were asking did relate to what was going on at the local project level. In this way, we were also able to filter out any questions that were offensive or threatening to respondents.

Inform People and Keep Them Informed

It was particularly important that local Teacher Corps participants understood the evaluation and its objectives because we were to rely on their input to make sure our focus was valid. If we could not establish good relations and build and maintain good communication, project people would be unable and unwilling to give us this input.

Having senior staff members visit projects was one way to start explaining the evaluation, and the next was to hold a series of regional meetings. Three regional meetings were held at the close of the planning year, and all Teacher Corps project directors and their documentors attended. Evaluation staff members responsible for design, analysis, and reporting activities gave the participants an overview of the evaluation and descriptions of the sampling and analysis plans and data collection design. The participants were given a full set of instruments and each one was fully explained. Some revisions were suggested at these meetings, and these were incorporated into the instruments.

The first annual report, a description of the evaluation, was prepared as a guide for government agencies, researchers, and participants in the projects. This document, the Project Guide to the Teacher Corps Evaluation, was sent to all project directors, deans of schools of education, school superintendents, community council chairpersons, and principals of the schools in which there were Teacher Corps projects. Additional requests for the document from people in projects were filled whenever possible.

The document describes the evaluation in layman's terms. It gives an overview of the Teacher Corps program and the program evaluation, describes the sample plan, and provides a description of data collection instruments and the data collection schedule. The mailing to principals was particularly helpful in securing cooperation at the local school level.

Establish Clear Lines of Communication and Respond to Concerns

During the regional meetings, the project directors were identified as the points of contact within the project; no telephone calls or mailings were to be made to other members of the local project. In return, a member of the SRI evaluation staff was named as the primary contact person. Good communication was established and has been maintained by our ensuring that the local project director knows what is going on (and is responsible for passing on this information to others in the project) and has a contact on the evaluation team.

A line of communication has also been established through the self-report questionnaires. At the end of each questionnaire, the respondent is urged to comment on Teacher Corps or on the evaluation. Although many of the comments relate to concerns at the local level, many others have been suggestions of what questions we should be asking. Similarly, when a non-respondent receives a reminder about the questionnaire, we include a letter asking whether the respondent prefers not

to respond and if so to please let us know why. The responses have been most helpful to us in pinpointing moves out of the project, respondents' concerns about not knowing enough about Teacher Corps to provide good data, and so on.

An evaluator should not react to every grumble, but he or she must be sensitive to resolving problems before they become exaggerated in the minds of local participants. For example, a few projects still expressed concern about participation in the Teacher Corps evaluation at the start of the second year. Each of these projects was treated as a special case; SRI did not ignore these concerns and assume they would disappear. An evaluation staff member visited these projects and met with policy board members, made a presentation to school district personnel, and did whatever else was necessary to bring about understanding and cooperation. These visits were effective, and resistant projects did cooperate.

Provide and Receive Feedback

The Teacher Corps evaluation requires data from projects that are in the process of implementing a program, and those projects would welcome information on the effectiveness of their program implementation. Returning data to projects on a regular basis was not easy because we did not want to jeopardize the summative nature of the evaluation. After considerable thought, we developed a profile of the climate of each project to solve this problem. These profiles are based on items contained in the self-report questionnaires that measure the degree of collaboration and cooperation in a project. Data from these items are aggregated across role groups to form a profile of the climate of each project. Upon written request, project directors are sent the profile of the climate in their project as perceived by respondents and as compared with a norm based on all reporting projects.

Never Surprise Anyone

People must be given lead time before a data collection activity. This is particularly true in schools, where the school calendar and teacher release time affect the scheduling of interviews and observations. In this study, a major data collection event is scheduled with three considerations in mind:

- The overall schedule of the evaluation
- Individual project schedules
- School district calendar and schedules.

Before any round of site visits, project directors are notified of the upcoming visit by a general mailing. A schedule for the site visit is then established during a telephone call. After the schedule has been worked out for all projects, a letter is sent to confirm the length of the visit, the visit dates, who is to be interviewed, what other data collection will take place, and who the site visitor will be (if this is known at the time). The local project director often uses this letter to notify others in the project of the forthcoming visit. Finally, the site visitor calls the project director to confirm that he or she will be the one to visit the project.

Before sending questionnaires to teachers in the schools, we send the principals a letter to inform them that the mailing will take place. In this way, teachers with questions about the self-report mailing can ask the principal, who can consult the Project Guide to answer questions.

Standards for Maintaining Project Relations

We have established the following standards for maintaining rapport with projects, including the university school of education, the school district, and the schools:

- We abide by the local project director's decision as to whether local protocol necessitates a visit with a dean or superintendent during a site visit. Our preference is that such a visit be made.
- When entering a school, an evaluation visitor always goes to the school office to let the principal know that he or she is on the premises. Similarly, the visitor reports when he or she is leaving.
- Evaluation staff members are frequently asked to make presentations or talk about their own areas of expertise while on site. We welcome the opportunity to do so, particularly if advance warning is given.
- After a visit is concluded, the site visitor personally writes to thank each person interviewed.
- Teachers receive an honorarium for each completed questionnaire. (The teacher instrument is long and requires time that may conflict with a teacher's present paperwork and teaching load.)

Maintaining Cooperation

Once cooperation with local participants has been established, we cannot assume that it will remain. We pay constant attention to the tenor of the field. Problems surface promptly and are dealt with before they become major concerns when the communication lines have been established properly.

Results

How effective have these techniques been in securing local cooperation? First, all projects selected for the 30-project sample subset and for special samples remain. We were obliged to have evaluation team members make presentations at some sites to convince them to participate but all did agree to participate and have maintained their commitment. In fact, one project director stated that it was the willingness of the evaluation staff member to visit the project and speak with the Policy Board that changed local attitudes toward the evaluation.

Second, as Table 2 indicates, response rates for the first and second administration of the self-report questionnaires in the 30-project sample are high. Each mailing was followed by at least two additional mailings to nonrespondents. The teacher response rate was 75% in the first administration and 81% in the second. This success is probably related to the honorarium paid each teacher as well as to a desire to cooperate. High response rates for deans of schools of education (81%) and for superintendents of schools (90%) may also be attributed to a perception that the evaluation is worthwhile. The return rate for principals is also high (80%), given their heavy paperwork burden.

Third, the response by projects to documentation requests has been good. To date, 995 essays have been submitted to SRI by the 132 projects.

The facts that all projects remain in the evaluation samples, that response rates for self-report questionnaires are high (indicating that participants value the evaluation as a means of expressing their view of the local project and the program as a whole), and that we continue to receive a steady flow of thoughtfully prepared documentation lead us to believe that the actions taken to secure local cooperation have been effective.

Table 2

RESPONSE TO SELF-REPORT QUESTIONNAIRES
1st Administration, May 1980
2nd Administration, October 1980

Role Group	All Projects*		30-Project Sample			
	1st Administration		1st Administration		2nd Administration	
	n	% Return	n	% Return	n	% Return
Project director	83	88	30	87	30	90
Documentor	-	-	31	94	27	85
Dean	83	82	31	83	32	81
Superintendent	83	75	32	70	31	90
Comm Council Chair	102	63	36	63	34	64
Principal	231	72	96	83	78	80
Teacher	1,875	70	505	75	396	81
Team leader	-	-	20	100	31	81
Intern	187	71	80	81	119	60
IHE faculty	-	-	215	67	238	62

*All projects except Native American, Youth Advocacy, and 30-Project Sample.

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